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SUBJECT: BRYANSK: GOVERNOR BOASTS STABILITY AMID CRISIS,
COMMUNISTS HOPE FOR ELECTORAL GAINS

REF: MOSCOW 290

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Alice Wells for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: A February 18-19 visit to Bryansk revealed a regional government enjoying strong Moscow support yet focused on shifting attention away from the growing economic crisis. Isolated investment successes and a pan-Slavic economic forum in Bryansk, featuring an appearance by State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, have provided a PR coup for the governor and for United Russia as March 1 elections approach. Bryansk lacks any popular or coordinated liberal democratic opposition, leaving the Communist Party as the only real threat to United Russia's dominance. Despite expectations of voter fraud and limited broadcast media access, the Communists have targeted Bryansk as a key electoral battleground for the March 1 regional elections. End Summary.

Government Highlights Investment Projects, Moscow Support

¶2. (C) Despite the deepening economic crisis, the Bryansk Region government has focused on isolated investment projects and the cachet of Moscow backing to bolster its image and limit the political opposition ahead of March 1 regional and municipal elections. Trade and Industry Chamber Chair Natalya Suvorova rosily predicted February 18 that Bryansk would weather the crisis well, but then just ten minutes later she complained that vanishing bank credit and a lack of talented professionals in the region (e.g., lawyers, businessmen, editors) would scare away investment. Isolated investment successes have therefore received major local media coverage, such as the February 21 opening of a new shopping mall amid much fanfare from Bryansk Governor Nikolai Denin. However, the governor's popularity remains uncertain amid declining industrial output and rising unemployment (cited at 11.4 percent by the pro-government Suvorova). On the other hand, local businesswoman Arina Ivanicheva offered us a grimmer outlook with stories of numerous small businesses that recently shuttered and commercial rent prices that have dropped by as much as 50 percent since last summer.

¶3. (C) Governor Denin also used the February 18 first-ever International Slavic Economic Forum as an opportunity to bolster the regional government's standing. With a goal of promoting investment and Slavic unity, the forum brought together political, banking, and business leaders from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine (as well as delegations from several European and Asian countries). It is unclear whether the forum will result in jobs and investment, but the loud applause given to various speakers' calls to "unite the Slavic culture" and "promote Slavic unity" demonstrated Bryansk's strategic importance as the only Russian region bordering both Ukraine and Belarus. Akhmed Abdullaev, a forum attendee and Deputy General Director of Renaissance Construction in Moscow, told us the forum would not benefit his firm and likely would not result in new investment "except maybe projects that will bring money to those who

already have it," an allusion to allegedly corrupt projects in the region. (Note: One example of corruption cited frequently by contacts was the boondoggle related to building a new local airport. End Note.) The forum, Abdullaev confided, offered local leaders "a chance to drink too much vodka and read too much bad poetry to their guests."

¶4. (C) Support from Moscow has provided a further boost for the regional government and has demonstrated that the Kremlin does not intend to give ground easily in the March 1 elections. The most recent indications of Moscow support included State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov delivering opening remarks at the February 18 forum and holding meetings with the governor, and the February 16 visit by pro-Kremlin Just Russia party leader (and Federation Council chair) Sergey Mironov.

Communists Expect Boost, Fraud in March Election

¶5. (C) Even the Bryansk governor's office conceded that the Communist Party would benefit at the polls on March 1 from present economic hardships. Andrey Anofrikov, the new press secretary for Governor Denin, acknowledged that the Communists likely would receive a small bump of about 5 percent (bringing them to 25 percent) due to increasing voter frustrations with the crisis. In response, United Russia has campaigned vigorously. Downtown Bryansk was papered with campaign posters and billboards for United Russia, with nearly every store window including at least one sign for the party. Canvassers distributed United Russia literature. Elsewhere in town, LDPR and Just Russia each had one lone

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billboard to broadcast their message. We did not see a single Communist billboard or poster, and KPRF's Bryansk branch declined to meet with us.

¶6. (C) Since KPRF leader Gennadiy Zyuganov's January prediction that the Communists would make large gains in Bryansk's March 1 elections, the Communists have pinned their hopes on using the region as a first blow against United Russia dominance. Zyuganov and KPRF leaders spent February 24-25 in Bryansk to rally supporters, but party leaders privately have acknowledged they do not expect the official vote tallies will be accurate. KPRF Deputy Chair Ivan Melnikov told us February 5 that widespread electoral fraud would hide his party's real gains in the regions (reftel), an accusation for which regional Yabloko branch leader Andrey Ponomarev claimed to have evidence. Ponomarev claimed that his accountant, Tatyana Rozavoniya, also worked as a secretary for the regional electoral commission. Although not independently verifiable, Ponomarev told us that Rozavoniya told him she personally had witnessed electoral fraud during past elections.

Democratic Opposition Nearly Non-Existent

¶7. (C) Democratic opposition in Bryansk remains in shambles and in no position to muster public support against the government, much less pose any threat to it. Yabloko's Ponomarev told us his party had only 500 members region-wide, down from 5,000 members six years ago, and that the last opposition protest had been in October 2008. Vladimir Shcherbakov, head of the regional branch of the Russian People's Democratic Union (RNDS, headed by former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov), shared Ponomarev's downbeat assessment of regional political opposition. "Nobody cares who the leadership is," Shcherbakov explained, adding that "the people here worry too much about how they will eat and how they will work" to rally on the streets.

"Dacha Ring" an Unlikely Political Safety Valve

18. (C) Gubernatorial press secretary Anofrikov speculated that economic disaster would not necessarily lead to political unrest in Bryansk because those suffering most from the crisis would retreat to what he called the "dacha ring" around the city. During the 1998 crisis, he explained, local residents moved from their city homes to their summer homes outside Bryansk. There, he said, Bryansk residents lived far more cheaply, subsisted on food they raised, and were away from downtown Bryansk where they might be tempted to rally against the government. The dacha ring's re-emergence, Anofrikov noted, would indicate a shift from economic to political instability if the demographic hemorrhaging from urban areas were not managed properly. However, given the region's greater wealth and number of small and medium-sized businesses today (at least 1,000 according to Tatyana Suvarova) compared to 1998, the so-called dacha ring may not appeal as an alternative to life in the city.

Comment

19. (C) Despite growing economic troubles in the region, Bryansk likely will not suffer any significant political shifts in the March 1 elections. KPRF leader Zyuganov personally targeted Bryansk as a political battlefield on which he hoped to draw blood against United Russia to demonstrate his party's renewed vigor. However, his plan to win a majority of regional duma seats certainly will fall far short, at least in the "official" vote tallies, since Moscow remains unwilling to let any region be the first crack in United Russia's dominance. Bryansk's importance to Moscow may also lay in its strategic location bordering both Ukraine and Belarus. Pumping up Bryansk as a nexus of pan-Slavic vitality may not result in large financial investments, but it should provide an added morale boost to carry the region's leaders past the elections.

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